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From Lovers to Volunteers: Tian Han and the National Anthem

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By Liang Luo

As the clock counts down towards the opening of the Olympic Games at 8 p.m. on August 8, 2008, the Chinese government and many ordinary Chinese citizens are hoping that one particular song will make an impression on television viewers in all corners of the globe: "March of the Volunteers," the



country's [National Anthem](#). Not only will it play during the Opening Ceremony and the Closing Ceremony, but also every time a Chinese athlete wins a gold medal, and expectations are running high that this will happen a lot, thanks largely to the high caliber of the [women competing for the PRC](#).

Even if international audiences grow accustomed to the [sound of the tune](#), they are unlikely to know that the national anthem is actually a theme song of a film that antedates the founding of the PRC by a decade and a half, a film that was just as much about Chinese nationalism as it was about sentimental young lovers and their struggles in troubled times. And even within China, many people don't know much about the two originators of the song, composer Nie Er and poet and playwright Tian Han, beyond a few recycled clichés about their dramatic lives.

Given the obsession with the supposedly auspicious number 8, Tian Han's own biography is a very appropriate point of departure. He was born in 1898, a year famous for the "Hundred Days of Reform," an effort at radical change stymied by conservatives within the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). And he died in 1968—not, as one might expect from the author of the lyrics to a national anthem, in the limelight, but rather in obscurity, under an assumed name, in a military hospital. So who was this man? How did he emerge as the key creator of the National Anthem of the PRC? More importantly, how did expressions of nationalism come to be so intricately connected with images of strong-willed (and bodied) women in modern China?

Born into a declining gentry family in the countryside of Hunan, Tian Han came to understand the world around him through local operas and puppet plays. In 1913 and 1915, while still a teenager, he took the step from being a consumer of opera to a producer and



published two opera librettos, the very first literary works in an extremely prolific career. During Tian Han's Tokyo sojourn from 1916 through 1922, his love for Chinese opera, combined with his sensitivity to new cultural trends, immediately drew him towards film and drama. What began as love at first sight in Tokyo became a lifelong passion for film and drama throughout Tian Han's cultural journey from Tokyo to Beijing, culminating in his attempt to reform Chinese opera "from the perspective of the film art."

This genre-centered biographical sketch by no means suggests that Tian Han somehow lived in a sociopolitical vacuum. He was, at one and the same time, a man of letters and a man of action: an active student leader during his Tokyo sojourn, a famous "leftist" playwright during his Shanghai years, an organizer of anti-Japanese "guerrilla drama troupes" during the war with Japan in the Chinese hinterland, and a middle-ranking cultural bureaucrat in Beijing after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949.

By the time Tian Han came to conceive the film story *Fengyun ernü* (Lovers in Troubled Times) which the future National Anthem emerged from, he had undergone radical self-criticism some four years earlier, and had joined the Communist Party in 1932. One would expect to see a film made by a



Communist-controlled film company portraying soldiers on the warfront; however, the film rather faithfully follows Tian Han's story, opening with a scene of flirtation between a Westernized femme fatale and two young men.

Tian Han immediately configured his male protagonists in relation to two spatially hierarchical worlds: the world of the poor young girl and her laboring mother living downstairs from the two young men's attic room; and the world of the seductive Mrs. C, living on the third floor of a private villa, who has "the eyes of a wolf" and who, in the young man's poem, is "the daughter of Eve, the messenger of Satan." The young men gradually enter deep into these two worlds. When they pawn their valuables to pay the rent for the poor young girl, she visits their room and discovers there the painting of a phoenix. The story of the immortal phoenix that leaps into fire every five hundred years to be reborn fascinates the girl and she decides to change her name from Ah Feng to Xin Feng, that is, from a "little phoenix" to a "new phoenix."

After the death of Xin Feng's mother, the poor virgin becomes a member of the two young men's "artistic family." No sexual relationship in this "artistic family" of two young men and one young girl is depicted. However, celibacy does not mean lack of romance. On the contrary, the lack of obvious sexual encounter could itself be an indicator of the underlying romance. In particular, for the "lovers in troubled times" in Shanghai, physical sacrifice and anti-Japanese activism seem to substitute for sexual intercourse. The sexual energy between the young men and the young girl is further disguised as educational zeal to mold the virgin girl into a modern woman. Baihua, the Romantic poet, insists that she should receive modern education; while his friend Zhifu, the practical "revolutionary," wants to introduce her to factory work.

When Zhifu is arrested for his radical activities and Baihua is hunted by the police, the poet finds shelter with the mysterious Mrs. C, who treats him like her husband, greets him with a warm kiss and keeps him at her place overnight. The overflow of sexual energy and the mutually beneficial sexual relationship between the poet and the femme fatale further illustrate the uneasiness surrounding the platonic relationship between the young men and the virgin. As if mesmerized, the poet goes with the femme fatale to the seashore of Qingdao, a German colony and an escapist utopia; while Xin Feng, the girl under the protection of the poet, has to quit school and join a touring dance troupe to make a living.

The climax, both in terms of plot and in terms of the sexual energy circulating within that plot, comes when Baihua and Mrs. C go to a variety show in which Xin Feng, the virgi



n girl touring with the dance troupe, performs a miniature opera entitled "Tieti xia de genü" ("Singing Girl under the Iron Hoof"). This "New Phoenix," the patriotic singing girl, is indeed the virgin Baihua helped to educate. The image of a virgin under the iron hoof, though charged with sexual energy, is used here as a warning bell to awaken the poet from the licentious life he was living in his escapist dreamland. The poet starts to feel a more important

task waiting for him after this dramatic encounter. He gets in touch with Zhifu and through Zhifu's introduction joins the volunteer army in the northeast.

Baihua's troop happens to be in Xin Feng's village where he discovers the phoenix painting and reunites with Xin Feng, who, after meeting Baihua, leaves the dance troupe for her homeland and warfront. Facing Japanese air raids, with flag in hand, Baihua and Xin Feng, marching with the masses, start to sing [the last stanza from the long poem "Great Wall"](#):

Arise, you who refuse to be slaves (of the femme fatale!).
With our flesh and blood let us build our new Great Wall.
The Chinese nation has come to the time of greatest danger
Every person must join the ultimate cry:
Arise! Arise! Arise!
The masses are of one mind,
Brave the enemy's gunfire,
March on! March on! March on! On!

Situating the young poet Baihua first and foremost in his struggle between the world of the virgin girl and the world of the femme fatale, the theme song of the film, *Yiyongjun jinxingqu* ("March of the Volunteers"), which has been regarded only as a nationalist call to arms in the face of the Japanese invasion, can be interpreted rather differently. "The nationalist poet" Xin Baihua, writing his epic poem in the hopes of educating the poor girl to become a "modern woman," found himself the prey and a love slave of the femme fatale.

The almost comical displacement from freed slave of a femme fatale to freed slaves of the national enemy is suggestive of the intrinsic connections between the personal and the political. Just as in the painting entitled "Fenghuang niepan" (named after Guo Moruo's poem), in which a phoenix throws itself into the fire to gain a new life, the young intellectuals were also transforming themselves through a baptism by fire, from sentimentalists to revolutionaries throughout the political vicissitudes of modern China. However, the sudden and complete transformation of the poet Xin Baihua, mesmerized by a femme fatale until the very end of the film when he not so convincingly rises up to defend a greater cause, cannot be taken as representative of a generation of modern intellectuals. The apparently seamless transition from individual desire to collective ideology did not turn out to be as smooth in real life, as exemplified in Tian Han's own painful metamorphosis throughout the Communist era, culminating in his silent death during the Cultural Revolution in Beijing.

Tian Han took part in the new Political Consultative Conference that designated "March of the Volunteers" as the temporary national anthem for the PRC in 1949. According to Chinese researcher Guo Chao, Zhou Enlai nominated "March of the Volunteers" based on its popularity among the Chinese people and argued against others' reservation towards its "outdated" lyrics. This "temporary" national anthem was in use for more than a decade and a half, until the Cultural Revolution, when "[East is Red](#)" and "[Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman](#)" in reality replaced "March of the Volunteers" as national anthems. When Tian Han was criticized as a "poisonous weed" during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, though the tune could still be played, the lyrics of "March of the Volunteers" were banned. After the Cultural Revolution, a new com



mittee was established to create a “new” national anthem, and finally new lyrics were written collectively to the tunes of “March of the Volunteers” in 1978. The new lyrics end with the following lines: “We will for generations/Raise high Mao Zedong’s banner/March on!”

I consider myself lucky to have no recollection whatsoever of the new lyrics. When I started elementary school around 1980 in a mountain village in Sichuan province, it may have been too backward to quickly adopt the recent changes in the lyrics of the national anthem; or more likely, I was simply too young to take notice of such changes. After I transferred to a bigger city in 1984, the lyrics of the national anthem that I heard and sang at the weekly flag-raising ceremony were always Tian Han’s original, which, I now know, was restored to its original tune and reestablished as the National Anthem in 1982.

My personal encounter with the National Anthem coincides with the first meaningful participation of the PRC in the Olympic Games, in 1984. When Xu Haifeng won the first gold medal in Los Angeles and “March of the Volunteers” was heard for the first time in the history of the Olympic Games, the PRC announced its Olympic dreams to the world through its newly restored National Anthem. China would finally win its bid for the 2008 Olympic Games seventeen years later, in 2001, after its failed attempt in 1993; and “March of the Volunteers” would for the first time be written into the Chinese Constitution as the National Anthem of the PRC in 2002.

It is high time for us to look back and gain some historical perspective on “March of the Volunteers,” the most popular song of 1949’s China: born out of anti-Japanese sentiments as well as youthful desires of modern Chinese intellectuals at a time of personal and national crises, this film song celebrated modern Chinese intellectuals’ metamorphoses from lovers to volunteers; however, that process has not been as smooth in real life as in the film, and lovers and volunteers seem to have always coexisted in their mutual desire for sexual and patriotic expressions.